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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NICOSIA 000971

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: AKP AND OP: IS THE AKP GOVERNMENT IN SEARCH OF A  
NEW TURKISH CYPRIOT ADDRESS?

REF: NICOSIA 887

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L. Schlicher for reasons 1.4 (b) and 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary: Many Turkish Cypriots (T/Cs) consider Turkey's AKP the force behind the T/C Freedom and Reform Party (OP), the junior "coalition" partner to "TRNC President" Mehmet Ali Talat's CTP. Any doubts regarding AKP's support for OP were dispelled recently by the Turkish party's high-profile participation at an OP congress, and by the allegedly AKP-inspired defection of two opposition DP mayors to OP, which infuriated DP leader Serdar Denktash. According to both opposition and "government" sources, AKP has swung its support to the newfound (September 2006) OP and its leader, "Foreign Minister" Turgay Avci, hoping to deliver the "settler" (mainland Turkish-origin) vote and thereby weaken an increasingly feckless and recalcitrant T/C right-wing opposition. In so doing, AKP also aims to create a pliant counterbalance to the dominant (though weakening) position of CTP, without harming good relations with that party. AKP meddling reportedly has angered Talat. In contrast to the T/C right-wing parties, most CTP officials admit that the loathesome Avci has shone as "FM," and they evince little worry at his party's rise of fortunes. It remains unclear whether OP, even with help from Turkish PM Tayyip Erdogan and AKP, can gather enough support to be a major, enduring player in T/C politics, however. End Summary.

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"Support from Ankara vitally important"  
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12. (C) The participation of AKP deputy and foreign policy advisor Egemen Bagish at the November 24 Freedom and Reform Party (OP) party congress confirmed for many Turkish Cypriots the long-standing rumors of AKP support for OP, the junior "coalition partner" in the "TRNC." Bagish, along with AKP Antalya mayor Menderes Turel and AKP deputy Mevlut Cagusoglu, all spoke at the OP congress, the party's first since its founding in September 2006. On November 26, Hasan Ercakica, "Presidential" spokesman, told us that AKP "seems to be supporting OP," given such high-level participation. Usually, Ercakica claimed, only low-level Turkish party officials attend T/C party congresses.

13. (C) AKP hopes its support for OP will deliver the "settlers," Turkish migrants who have obtained "TRNC citizenship," who number approximately 33,870 and comprise roughly twenty-percent of all "TRNC citizens" (Note: An additional 77,731 Turkish citizens, about 29.3% of the total "TRNC" population, reside in the "TRNC" under some status

less than citizenship. They include students, guest workers, and those Turkish military personnel and their families that live off base. End Note). Bulent Aliriza, a scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and a long-time Embassy contact, told Poloff on December 4 that PM Erdogan had inquired why "our people" were not better represented in the "TRNC parliament" and "government." The CTP's Salih Usar, the "Public Works and Transport Minister," joked with us on November 29 that the Turkish settlers are like "little Turkish ambassadors" who take their signals from Ankara.

14. (C) OP has played up its close connections with Ankara and regularly boasts of its admiration of AKP, Erdogan, and Turkey (Reftel). In a December 5 interview with "Kibris," the highest-circulation daily in northern Cyprus, Avci said that "support from Turkey was vitally important to him." (Comment: While such a statement may be a fact for other parties as well, Avci's wording would surely grate on native Turkish Cypriot sensitivities given their love-hate relationship with Turkey, not blind infatuation. End Comment).

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"AKP game to destroy DP"  
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15. (SBU) Serdar Denktash, DP leader and former "Foreign Minister" before CTP dumped him in September 2006 in favor of OP and Avci, declared war on AKP after his party lost another two mayors--both Turkish settlers--to OP on the eve of the latter's party congress. At a November 26 press conference upon his return from Turkey, where he engaged AKP officials, Denktash charged that "the rumors turned out to be true. AKP is behind OP." He then presented an ultimatum to his own

NICOSIA 00000971 002 OF 003

party members: "If there is anyone who says that we will do whatever this or that party in Turkey wants, let him resign within a week."

16. (C) In a November 30 meeting with Embassy officers, Denktash related that AKP's "game is to destroy DP," allegedly over support that his father, long-time "TRNC President" Rauf Denktash, gave to the National Action Party (MHP) during recent Turkish parliamentary elections. He claimed that Egemen Bagish had "confessed" this in Ankara. He also alleged that AKP deputies had taken one of his defecting mayors to Turkey and made promises of financial support, both to his municipality and to the mayor personally. Denktash added that the present Turkish "ambassador" had kept out of the fray. (Note: Another cause of friction between DP and AKP is the former's 14-month boycott of "Parliament," in which the main right-wing opposition group, the National Unity Party (UBP), also participates. The two parties are protesting OP's unethical entry into "Parliament." The AKP, Erdogan, and Turkish President Abdullah Gul repeatedly have urged them to return to the "legislature." End Note)

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Tensions rising between Avci and Talat?  
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17. (C) AKP-inspired friction between Avci and Talat dominated the front page of "Kibrisli" on November 30. The paper charged that AKP interference had exacerbated political tension between them. Aliriza confirmed the usually-sensationalist "Kibrisli" report, telling Poloff that Talat, whom he had met in Cyprus days earlier, was unhappy that "Turkey's ruling party (AKP) was involved in Turkish Cypriot politics." The CSIS analyst added that the "President" and "FM" had met one-on-one for thirty minutes on November 25. One topic of conversation may have been Avci's increasing free-lancing; "Prime Ministerial" adviser (and reported former Talat squeeze) Yonca Senyigit complained to us November 26 that she had learned of several of Avci's

trips from the newspapers.

¶8. (C) Oddly, while most in CTP are contemptuous of Avci, they grudgingly admit he has succeeded in raising the "TRNC's" international profile and, as far as they know, has kept on the CTP's pro-solution message. The votes he steals come mainly from the right wing, they assert, not CTP's left-of-center base. Kutlay Erk, CTP's unofficial foreign policy guru, told Poloff on November 19 that Avci "was not doing a bad job as 'FM' and should travel even more." "Presidential" spokesman Ercakica complained of Avci's nepotism and penchant for corruption, although he admitted that OP might be a convenient coalition partner for CTP in the future.

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Comment: "What does the AKP government really want?"  
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¶9. (C) Comment: Every ruling party in Turkey has played favorites on Cyprus, from ANAP developing close ties to UBP, to CHP and MHP cozying up to Rauf Denktash. If indeed AKP is trying to build its "own" party in the TRNC--and there definitely are signs to that effect--we question the choice of OP and its focus on mainlanders. Settler parties have coalesced in the past, but did not take root mainly because of migrants' disparate political leanings, a degree of T/C prejudice and suspicion toward newcomers, and the difficulties any new party faces in the north's entrenched electoral system. Even if OP were to squeak past the five-percent barrier for "parliamentary" representation in the next scheduled elections, it would need at least double the minimum to really matter--a much taller order. Further, AKP must build up OP without souring relations with CTP, still the T/C community's strongest party and the only major one professing the same bizonal, bicomunal, federal Cyprus solution that Erdogan has espoused publicly.

¶10. (C) Conflicting reports regarding AKP's view on early "parliamentary" elections here further confuse the picture. According to Ercakica, Egeman Bagish told "President" Talat in late November that AKP wants the CTP-OP government to endure. If true, that "demand" would put OP in a far stronger position to contest regularly scheduled 2010 elections and drive UBP and DP, who seek elections in 2008, even further into their self-imposed, boycott-driven "exile."

NICOSIA 00000971 003 OF 003

Aliriza, however, reports that Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Cemal Cicek, who has the Cyprus portfolio, is so annoyed by the boycott and by T/C political squabbling that he is pressing for early elections in 2008 to clean the political slate here. Such an outcome would benefit UBP and DP, and put OP in the tough spot of contesting elections barely eighteen months after its founding. It would also undermine CTP, which has steadfastly opposed 2008 elections in favor of a vote in late 2009. Early elections falling in 2008 also would harm hopes for a restart of Cyprus Problem negotiations, already in a de facto holding pattern because of the February 2008 Republic of Cyprus presidential vote.  
End Comment.  
SCHLICHER